INTO THE FUTURE

February 23, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 43:14-21
Revelation 21:1-6

"Do not remember the former things,... I am about to do a new thing;..."
-Isaiah 43:18-19 (NRSV)

There comes a time to look backward and forward, a time to celebrate the past and to anticipate the future. Anniversaries or birthdays, for instance. On the anniversary of your marriage or your significant relationship it's a good idea to look back and try to recreate the romance that energized this thing in the first place - the ardor, the love, the little gifts. There's something sad and lifeless when individuals can't do that any longer. The New Yorker cartoon I used last Sunday to illustrate an entirely different point says it all. The businessman is handing his wife a folder. She says, "Gee Jeffrey, an annual report is an interesting way to celebrate our anniversary but I was hoping for something a little more romantic." Every birthday celebration ought to include a little fond recollection of the past, a retelling of how it was when the one whose birth anniversary is being celebrated was born, the funny incidents, the harrowing drive to the hospital in the middle of the night, arriving just in the nick of time. And, at their best anniversaries and birthdays always look forward as well, to the new year ahead, to the new adventures another year of life will bring.

There are times in the lives of individuals and of institutions for looking backward and forward. Today is one of them for this church, the occasion of the annual meeting of the congregation and corporation, an organizational necessity to elect officers and satisfy ourselves that the bills are paid and, in the case of the corporate part of the meeting, a requirement of the State of llinois. It's not usually a very romantic occasion.

Typically, the annual meeting of a Presbyterian Church is a fairly low-key affair. The truth is that not many people attend, mostly those who have tasks to do, read minutes, make reports, or are being elected - and the others who are waiting for them, their families or brunch dates. And the faithful remnant, the

loyal few who know that even without high drama an annual meeting is an important part of a congregation's life and who are steadfastly and supportively there.

No small amount of creativity, clergy and lay alike, is invested in cooking up schemes to convince people to attend the annual meeting. Change the date, change the day of the week, change the hour, serve lunch, provide babysitting, entertainment for the children, bring in speakers, audio visuals. Our scheme here is to have the meeting on a Sunday morning and almost make it difficult not to attend, and even that doesn't work much.

What works of course is controversy, division, a good old-fashioned church fight. Most of us, however, given our choice, will elect a poorly attended annual meeting rather than stir up a fight just to swell the ranks.

Today is the day in the life of this church. The 11:00 service will be significantly abbreviated and we are making a special appeal to our members to attend the meeting. If you are from out of town, or a first-time visitor, or worse yet, if you skipped worship in your suburban parish to see how they're doing it downtown these days, you may have just concluded that you made a big mistake, and that this is going to be about as interesting as someone else's family reunion, and as relevant as someone else's Christmas letter. But before you reach that conclusion, may I suggest that this business of the future may be the most relevant business of all - for every one of us. And so for the remainder of our time, please think with me about what we actually believe about the future, or want to believe, or are trying to believe, or feel compelled to believe about the future.

There are times when the future looms large, when something new is about to happen, when the very air is electric with anticipation and anxiety and fear. One of those times was certainly the middle of the 19th century - 1850s and '60s. Carl Sandburg wrote about that era in American history.

> "It was sunset and dawn, moonrise and noon,
> dying time and birthing hour."
> [The Prairie Years and the War Years, p. 191]

One of the individuals who seemed to know it, both the danger and the possibility of the future, was the President, Abraham Lincoln. One month before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation - which he knew would forever change the very soul of this nation - Lincoln made a speech to Congress. It was a difficult time for him personally. His speech that day was not one of his best, rambling, disorganized, until at the end he said something profound and terribly important. He said, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The

occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew. We must disenthrall ourselves."

Quaker philosopher, Elton Trueblood, called Lincoln "The Theologian of American Anguish," and never was Lincoln more a theologian, in the very best sense of the word, never more Biblical, than when he said: "We must disenthrall ourselves... the dogmas of the past are inadequate." The present looks difficult, but the future, if we can creatively disengage from the past, is full of enormous potential.

While most of us would nod in agreement about that... it has never been easy to live as if we believed... to live into the future.

Lincoln - with his "disenthrall ourselves" sounds very much like what a prophet of Israel said 2,500 years ago earlier. It's in the 43rd chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah in the midst of some of the loveliest and most reassuring and comforting poetry in all of literature -

> "Comfort, O comfort, my people says your God.
> The Lord is the everlasting God...
> He does not faint or grow weary;
> ...those who wait for the Lord
> shall renew their strength,
> they shall mount up with wings
> like eagles,
> they shall run and not be weary
> they shall walk and not faint."
> [Isaiah 40:1, 28b, 31]

And then -

> "Do not remember the former things,
> or consider the things of old.
> I am about to do a new thing:
> now it springs forth, do you not
> perceive it?" [Isaiah 43:18, 19]

The situation could not have been more difficult. The people who first read those words were exiles, captives actually, in a foreign land. Their army was defeated, their capital destroyed, their land in ruins. And they, for a generation, were prisoners. There did not seem to be much reason for hope.

The prophet reminded them, in eloquent images, that they had been there before, that their forebears were slaves in Egypt once and God had heard them groaning and had delivered them. Skillfully using their own history and their nostalgia, their propen-

sity in these tough times to recall how good it used to be - the prophet, in a stunning maneuver tells them they're looking in the wrong direction.

> "Do not remember the former things."
>
> "I'm about to do a new thing... and if you are so occupied with the past, with your obsession with survival, with your perpetuation of the traditions, the reminders of how it used to be, you are going to miss something I'm about to do."

There is in the prophet's word the energy and power of hope - the simple life-generating passion-producing power which happens when people look forward in anticipation.

Doctors know about it and see it every day as people battle disease and even as they begin to lose, continue the battle and in the battle somehow manage to live each day fully, because the source of their hope is greater than this particular skirmish.

Eric Fromm wrote, "If a person has given up hope he has entered the gates of hell, whether he knows it or not, and has left behind her/his own humanity."

And Victor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist who reflected so powerfully on his experience as a Holocaust survivor:

> "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future was doomed. With the loss of belief in the future, he lost his spiritual hold." [Man's Search for Meaning]

Some are saying that's exactly what's happening to our nation at the moment: that we've given up on our future, turned our backs on our children, who are the only future we have, and keep fiddling with schemes to make us what we were in 1945 again. And some are saying that that is what's wrong with the church... trying desperately to hold on to the past, refusing to acknowledge the realities of the present... looking backward instead of forward.

God - our oldest and best traditions tell us - is in the future, not the past. But it's difficult. With change happening all around us, with stable foundations shaking, with the future looking uncertain at best and frightening at worst, what looks good is something we can rely on not to change - ever.

Robin Lovin, President of Drew Theological Seminary, wrote recently in an essay on theological education, "The church can easily become a gentle anachronism, rather like the clubs that

get together to hold costumed jousting tournaments. Or it can become a haven for hatred and resistance to change."
[The Christian Century, 2/5-12/92]

Martin Marty says only partly in jest that the last eight words of the institutional church will be, "But we never did it that way before."

What we're attempting to do this morning is an alternative, a deliberate focusing of a complex institution's attention on the future: not to forget the past. In fact it is a way of honestly honoring the past by remembering that God's promise has always been about the future, that we are here today because people a century ago were hopeful about the future. Living into the future... conceiving and bearing children... planting trees... building churches... God's call - God's summons to us as church and as individuals is always to live into the future with hope and expectation and joy.

It is an invitation actually to think about God and our relationship to God in a totally new way.

Robin Lovin worries that the church is a gentle anachronism. Ministers worry because they know how many people simply dismiss the Christian faith for this very reason as irrelevant to the brave and complex and frightening new world of the future. And it does seem to me that when we think about God, we shift mentally and spiritually and intellectually into the past tense. Whatever reality the word God has for us it is in memory rather than anticipation and hope.

The Bible on the other hand says keep your eyes on the future. Watch the road ahead, not the rear view mirror. It is for me a very powerful suggestion that God comes to me, not from above, or out of the past, but ahead from my future. It's an intriguing idea. In theological terms, "God's transcendence can be conceived today as the absolute power of the future." [Carl Braaten in Ted Peters, Futures Human and Divine, p. 152]

In a book on futurism, Professor Ted Peters writes:

> "God did not create the world once upon a time as a watchmaker creates a watch, winds it up and lets it run. Rather, creation is still going on. It is a process of being drawn forward."
> [Ibid, p. 153]

And - one more pass at it - British theologian, John Taylor, writes:

> "There are two ways of looking at time... Is the source of time behind us, pushing us from history

> into the future? Or is the source of time ahead of us, pulling us out of history into the future... so that the present always has within it the seeds of hope?" [The Go-Between God, p. 76, 77]

I invite you this morning to think in a new way. The God we worship - the God who came among us in Jesus the Christ, the God to whom we pray - is a God to whom we can entrust the future; a God who - transcending all time and all space - is already in the future, calling us ahead, already preparing a future for us.

Someone asked Robert McAfee Brown recently what kept him going and he said quickly, "Hope" and then defined what he meant by quoting St. Augustine. St. Augustine said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters, their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." [See Martin Marty, Context, 2/1/92]

"Thy Kingdom come" we pray every week and what the prayer means is that what is is not necessarily what will be. Thy Kingdom come I find myself praying as I drive through Cabrini-Green... This is not necessary. This is not what God intends. this will not prevail.

"Thy Kingdom come" means that for each of us God's creation continues and we are not yet what we will one day be.

St. Paul felt it, knew it, as he faced his own personal destiny as a prisoner of Rome. Struggling to find words, big enough, he wrote:

> "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves."

It was a full generation later that old John, leader of the Church in Asia Minor, in prison on the Island of Patmos, wrote a cryptic letter back to the persecuted church's ordinary people who wanted to believe in Jesus Christ, but whose lives were very much in danger because of the open enmity and fierce persecution by Rome. It's called the Book of Revelation and it's full of strange images and cryptic formulas which his readers understood perfectly and the message is the same as it was to the exiled community centuries earlier.

It is a beautiful passage. The people who read it were frightened. The future looked uncertain at best. They knew that they could be arrested and killed at any moment. They knew that if they survived the future would be very strenuous. They were, that is to say, not so different from you and me, in ultimate terms. There are many forms of oppression and captivity and

exile, unemployment for instance, or the fear of unemployment, insecurity, fear of failure. There is no better word for addiction or codependence than "captivity." And there is no exile more real than loneliness, or the dryness of a once glorious relationship that has withered and died. And there is no oppression more real than serious, life-threatening illness. Although we do not face persecution, this matter of the future does have a way of becoming very personal and very relevant.

And so we read their words at the funeral liturgy or better said, the Celebration of the Resurrection, because they contain the Christian religion - the gospel - the hope - in eloquent simplicity.

They contain an invitation to trust the one who is already in the future, the one who is beyond time and who will be there beyond time to welcome us to the reunion. They contain an invitation to live boldly now and bravely and hopefully and joyfully into the future.

Hear them again:

> "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...
> And I saw the holy city,
> The new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven...
> And I heard a loud voice...
> 'See, the home of God is among mortals.
> God will dwell with them...
> God will wipe every tear from their eyes
> Death will be no more;
> mourning and crying and pain will
> be no more,...
> See, I am making all things new."
> [Revelations 21:1-5]

Amen.